

WRTP | BIG STEP

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4/11/22 Testimony

Select Committee on Economic Disparity and Fairness in Growth

Thank you Representative Steil, Chairperson Himes and honorable members of the Committee:

Today, we are facing a near crisis around the number of skilled laborers and artisans in the workforce. During the lockdown of 2020, we saw people across America come together to creatively support their local restaurants and shops, demonstrating that we as a community value the artisan and entrepreneur's contribution to the quality of our lives. As the world reopens, now is the time to make large-scale investments in those skilled workers whose crafts can profoundly improve our health, close environmental justice gaps, and create a new generation of craftspeople. Investments like the ones advanced by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law bolster America's infrastructure and repay us in dividends for generations when connected to thoughtful workforce development efforts that include talent pipeline development that focus on true diversity and equity efforts and work in tandem with higher education and technical education pathways.

Since the early 1990s, WRTP has created and implemented successful models of pre-employment and occupational training designed for underrepresented populations seeking employment in construction, manufacturing, and other emerging sectors. Known for our distinct model of linking economically disadvantaged people with employment opportunities with family sustaining wages and benefits, WRTP has built a network of nearly 300 "high road" employers, 70+ labor partners, and more than 100 community-based organizations to operationalize our mission to enhance the ability of public and private sector organizations to recruit, develop and retain a more diverse and qualified workforce for our regional economy. We serve thousands of individuals a year, nearly 70% of whom identify as a person of color, and nearly 1/3 have been justice-involved. To date, our 2021 average hourly placement rates are \$24.03, while the average hourly wage for all workers in the State of Wisconsin is \$24.26.

We do this work in tandem with partners in technical and higher education; through related-technical instruction or customized training opportunities. Yet our work offers another alternative "four-year degree" that is a debt-free pathway to a family sustaining career: Registered Apprenticeship.

Our fellow skilled trade union brothers and sisters, who for generations have made private investments in developing a qualified workforce (through paid training and instruction) to build modern skyscrapers and tackle the less-glamorous challenge of holding together an aging infrastructure without nearly enough public investment. Now is the time to address years of

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neglect and simultaneously make an investment in the systems that provided an opportunity for so many Americans in the 1970s and 1980s to enjoy a solidly middle-class life without post-secondary student loan debt, all the while improving quality of life for everyone in the community.

To achieve these goals, we must connect more people of color to Registered Apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeships while providing the supports necessary to see them through these journeys. This is work best done on the local level, with intentionality. WRTP | BIG STEP has proudly worked with leaders at the city and county level for decades to put measures in place that help ensure that contractors and unions train and employ people from our most economically challenged neighborhoods. When this work is funded and done with intention, we've seen how it changes lives. The infusion of skilled talent, family-sustaining wage careers, and an appreciation for safe, quality, and aesthetically beautiful spaces transforms neighborhoods.

Registered apprenticeship is critical to the tight labor market today. It is equitable, fair and one of the best pathways to family-sustaining wages and creation of generational wealth. It is most critical now as an option. The last few years of pandemic and civil unrest highlighted the daily inequalities that women, especially women of color, face. Women disproportionately shouldered the "essential worker" status in low wage jobs like grocery store clerks and fast food cashiers (more than 65% are female)¹, and while men comprise the lion's share of "essential sectors" like public safety, transportation logistics, and public utilities; these are traditionally occupations and fields with family sustaining wages, benefits, and even pensions.

A 2020 report by University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Dr. Marc Levine, entitled "The State of Black Milwaukee in National Perspective: Racial Inequality in the Nation's 50 Largest Metropolitan Areas" found²:

- Just over 60% of Black men between the ages of 25 and 54 were employed in 2018, compared with more than 90% for white males;
- The average income for a Black household in Milwaukee in 2018 was just under \$30,000, compared with close to \$80,000 for whites;
- 40% of Black households in Milwaukee are living in concentrated poverty and earning at or under \$10,000 annually in income, compared with 7.3% for white households.
- The average income of a Black family in Milwaukee was 19% higher than the U.S. average for African Americans in the 1970s, meaning African Americans are generally worse off today than 45 years ago.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/us/coronavirus-women-essential-workers.html>

² Levine, Marc V., "The State of Black Milwaukee in National Perspective: Racial Inequality in the Nation's 50 Largest Metropolitan Areas. In 65 Charts and Tables" (2020). Center for Economic Development Publications. 56. https://dc.uwm.edu/ced_pubs/56

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Likewise, COVID- 19's impact on education attainment and graduation rates is not readily clear, but early data suggests the US will see an uptick in high school (HS) non-completers, and reports are foreshadowing learners already impacted by educational opportunity divides may face obstacles for years to come, erasing gains made in national HS graduation rates the last decade. Complicating this is a labor market where employers, eager to fill positions during a labor market shortage, are loosening hiring requirements, including those around minimum education attainment. While this convergence of events may temporarily salve a non-HS completer's challenges when navigating the job market, it will not last. COVID exposed the volatile nature of employment for non-HS completers: In February 2020, the unemployment gap between HS diploma holders and those without was 2.2%; that gap ballooned to 12% between February and May 2020, and the current poverty rate for non-completers is two times higher than for college graduates.

Our model at WRTP | BIG STEP of pathways to and through apprenticeship assists non-HS completers and those who are justice-involved create a clear plan to skills training, which is often the first step to our most traditionally disenfranchised populations. Our North American Building Trades Unions Multi-Craft Core Curriculum is an approved construction training program and is supported by tutoring and support services. It provides the first step, the first credential that someone can use immediately on the job and start to structure a career through Registered Apprenticeship. This credential can be used to enter technical education or higher education farther into their journey.

The Manufacturing Skills Standards Council curriculum is an approved manufacturing training program and is again, supported by tutoring and support services. It also provides the first step, the first credential that someone can use immediately on the job and gives them credit for prior learning toward a Registered Apprenticeship. Again, this credential can be used to enter technical education or higher education farther into their journey.

WRTP | BIG STEP is proud to be a certified training provider in both the MC3 and MSSC. Not only do we conduct these 'first-step' trainings for adults and youth we also pair the MC3 Construction Credential with a High-School Equivalency Degree AND the MSSC Manufacturing Credential with a High-School Equivalency Degree. We also work with the Department of Corrections to conduct these credentialed trainings in Youth and Adult Correctional Facilities. These credentials flow directly into Registered Apprenticeship and provide the necessary education and skills to meet today's labor market demands.

Entering a Registered Apprenticeship (RA) is much like entering college: there are requirements and benchmarks to be met. Apprenticeship is a long and steadfast model within our industry, and it has served us well. We are glad that new industries and sectors are adopting this model

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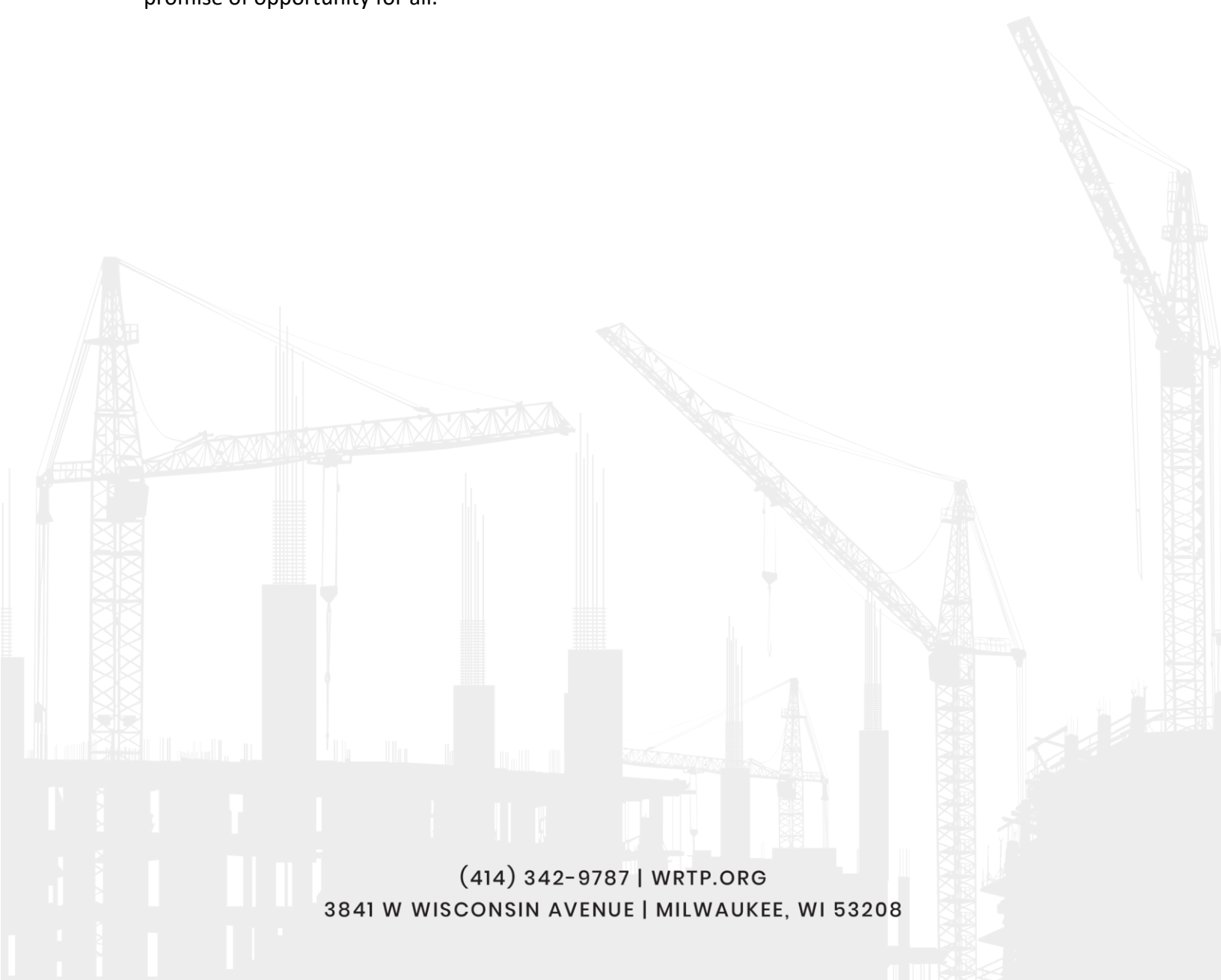
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and “earn as you learn” approach, and it’s encouraging that we have public officials at the table advocating for this talent development strategy.

Registered Apprenticeship should not be a ‘best kept secret’ or viewed as inferior to other educational pathways. In fact, it combines three to five years of technical education and on the job training and provides a springboard to a Journeyperson’s card which is recognized and respected by technical colleges and other educational institutions. And all of this is at no cost to the apprentice.

We need to ensure long-term, secure employability--and a Journeyperson’s card simply has genuine promise of delivering on it. As a player at the workforce development table doing this work every day we know we must work toward the real impact we all want to have, so that collectively we can begin to make good on the promise of Registered Apprenticeship and the promise of opportunity for all.



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